

## 12: Germany and the outbreak of the Second World War

### WAS HITLER TO BLAME FOR THE SECOND WORLD WAR?

Hitler had made the aims of his foreign policy perfectly clear in his book *Mein Kampf*. As a first step, he intended to unite all German-speaking peoples. This went against the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, but one reason for Hitler's popularity in Germany was his determination to reject the treaty. The next step, having brought all Germans into one Reich (one state) would be to build an empire. Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*, 'When the territory of the Reich embraces all Germans, only then can the right arise, from the need of the people, to acquire foreign territory.' This foreign territory, which he called '*Lebensraum*' – living space – would probably be in eastern Europe. It would be seized from people like the Poles and Russians, whom Hitler regarded as inferior.

This policy of expansion would be bound to lead, sooner or later, to war. Hitler's plan for the Nazi state was that it should be totally organised for war. Foreign observers and Germans close to Hitler were quite clear about this.

#### Who else was to blame?

It would be wrong to think that Hitler had a detailed and clever 'master-plan'. As Source 1B shows, he had no idea when war would come. He showed great skill at creating opportunities and making the best of them. But other factors played

their part: problems with the terms of the Treaty of Versailles; many countries were suspicious of the USSR; the French were always hostile to Germany; Britain was reluctant to stand up to Hitler. In the 'Steps to war' which follow, think about where blame lies at each point.

### STEPS TO WAR, 1933-1937

#### 1. LEAVING THE LEAGUE, 1933

One of Hitler's first actions was to leave the League of Nations. The League had been born out of the Versailles humiliation, and Hitler wanted no part in it. This action made it obvious that if Hitler was going to be stopped, it would not be through the League.

#### 2. GERMANY'S NEIGHBOURS

All Europe seemed united in opposing him. The weaker countries with German minorities like Poland and Czechoslovakia, which might have been among his first targets, were closely linked in alliance to France. Of course, Hitler's propaganda machine tried to show that these alliances 'hemmed Germany in'. Hitler also used them as an excuse for rearmament.

#### 3. AUSTRIA, 1934

The invasion of Austria would be the most likely first step in Hitler's plan to unite all Germans into

one state. Austria was not only German-speaking, it was also Hitler's own birth-place. In 1934, he arranged for Austrian Nazis to kill the Austrian Chancellor, Dollfuss. The Nazis then invited Hitler to become ruler of Austria. The attempt failed, however, when Mussolini sent Italian troops to the Austrian border to prevent a German take-over. Mussolini was suspicious of Hitler at that stage, and Germany was too weak to undertake a war with anyone, so Hitler backed down. This shows his ability to create opportunities, even up to the point of assassination, but also shows that he was not always successful. The Dollfuss affair taught Hitler that he would have to increase Germany's strength and make an ally of Mussolini.

#### 4. REARMAMENT

The rearmament of Germany continued at speed through the 1930s. By 1935, for example, Goering had built up an air force, the *Luftwaffe*. Military service was introduced, and the German army provided itself with the latest weapons, especially tanks. Pocket battleships – that is, fast, heavily armed warships – and a number of submarines, were built. All this was, of course, contrary to the terms decided at Versailles. However, some countries, particularly Britain, now felt that the terms of the treaty were too harsh; why shouldn't Germany be allowed to have reasonable armed forces like every other country?

The disarmament of Germany in 1919 had not been followed by disarmament of the other

powers. Several disarmament conferences had been held, but no real disarming had actually taken place. The old problems of mistrust remained. In 1935, Germany was still only building up its forces and did not yet represent a threat.

The Depression of the 1930s added strength to this view: several countries were solving their unemployment problems by strengthening their armed forces and giving government contracts to arms factories. If it solved Germany's unemployment problems, then could Hitler be blamed? France, for example, was building a huge defence system, called the Maginot Line, all along the Franco-German frontier (see Map 12-1). Hitler, of course, made a great deal of propaganda out of the 'unfairness' of Germany's position.

In 1935, Britain, France and Italy met at Stresa, and all three condemned German actions in Austria. However, in the same year, as we have seen, the Anglo-German naval agreement was signed, by which Britain agreed to allow the German navy to grow in size up to 35% of the strength of the British navy. Thus the unity shown at Stresa was soon broken. Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in the same year broke it still further. Britain and France opposed the invasion, then tried to make a deal with Mussolini (see Chapter 11, page 110). Even so, Mussolini looked around for another ally.

#### 5. THE RHINELAND, 1936

The storm over Ethiopia provided a smoke-screen



for Hitler's next action: the reoccupation of the Rhineland (see Map 12-1). The Rhineland had been demilitarised by the Treaty of Versailles: that is, no soldiers were allowed in the area.

In March 1936, German troops marched confidently into the Rhineland, but Hitler and his generals were far from confident.

The Reichstag, more tense than I have ever felt it, began promptly at noon. General Blomberg, the War Minister, was as white as a sheet and fumbled nervously with his fingers. Hitler began with a long harangue about the injustice of the Versailles treaty and the peacefulness of the German people. Then: 'In the interests of the primitive rights of its people to the security of their defence, the German government has re-established from today absolute and unrestricted sovereignty in the demilitarised zone'.

Now the six hundred deputies, all personal appointees of Hitler, little men with big bodies and bulging necks and cropped hair and pouched bellies and brown uniforms and heavy boots, little men of clay in his fine hands, leap to their feet, their right arms outstretched in the Nazi salute and scream 'Heil'. It was a long time before the cheering stopped. A few generals made their way out. Behind their smiles, you could not help detecting nervousness.

Next day: Hitler has got away with it.

France is not marching . . . No wonder the faces of Goering and Blomberg were all smiles at noon . . . Oh, the stupidity (or is it the paralysis?) of the French. I learnt today that the German troops had strict orders to beat a hasty retreat if the French army opposed them in any way.

William Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, published 1941

William Shirer in Source 2B was quite correct: if the German troops had met any opposition in the reoccupation of the Rhineland, they would have been withdrawn. German rearmament had not yet made Germany strong enough to oppose France.

Why did the French do nothing? There were several reasons. France itself was split into several groups which were struggling for power. No united policy was possible. Britain would not help France. The French generals had decided to rely on a purely defensive policy and to put their trust in the Maginot Line. Several French generals were sympathetic to Fascism and not hostile to Hitler. All of these facts added up to a lack of will to take the initiative.

## 6. THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

In the same year, 1936, the Spanish Civil War broke out. The right-wing General Franco led an armed rebellion against the Spanish Republican government. This gave a further twist to events which was very much to Hitler's advantage. Hitler and Mussolini regarded the rebellion of General

Franco as part of the fight against Communism. Both sent men and supplies in large quantities to help Franco. The first cities to feel the horror of a German bombing raid were in Republican Spain.

The attitude of France and Britain was non-intervention – that is, not to help either side. Mussolini's disagreement with Britain and France over Ethiopia brought him closer to Hitler. In 1936 they signed an alliance: the Rome–Berlin Axis. Later the same year, Hitler signed an alliance with Japan called the Anti-Comintern Pact. This was aimed against Russia. Mussolini joined the Anti-Comintern pact in 1937, and the line-up of one of the sides in the Second World War was complete.

German rearmament continued. There was now no doubt about Germany catching up with Britain and France. Hitler was spending twice as much as Britain and France combined on his army, navy and air force. The German armed forces were soon much stronger than theirs. Dr Hans Schacht, Hitler's Economics Minister was putting the German economy on a war footing. Hitler was replacing generals who were not prepared to risk war to achieve his aims with those who were. Reluctantly, Britain and France began to rearm.

#### *7. THE ANNEXATION OF AUSTRIA, 1938*

In March 1938, Hitler ordered the Austrian Nazis to stir up trouble inside Austria. The Austrian Chancellor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, was forced to make three Austrian Nazis ministers. Hitler's bullying of Schuschnigg shows how Germany was now

using its strength: 'You, Herr Schuschnigg, have done everything to avoid a friendly policy. The German Reich is one of the Great Powers and no one will raise his voice if it settles its border problems. Italy? I see eye to eye with Mussolini. England? England will not move one finger for Austria. France? France could have stopped Germany in the Rhineland, but it is too late for France. Think it over, Herr Schuschnigg, think it over well. I can only wait until this afternoon.'

Schuschnigg ordered a plebiscite to be held in Austria: a national vote to see if Austrians wanted to be part of Germany. This could have made Hitler look foolish, so German troops occupied Austria before the plebiscite could be held. This act of annexation was known as the Anschluss. In this way, the first piece of foreign territory was added to Germany: the first of many. Schuschnigg was sent to a concentration camp, and an extermination camp was immediately set up at Mauthausen to deal with Austrian Jews.

#### *8. CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1938–1939*

The next country on Hitler's list did not have to wait long. The German-speaking fringe of Czechoslovakia was called the Sudetenland (see Map 12-2). Hitler called on Henlein, leader of the Sudetenland Nazis, to stir up trouble there. The German papers began to publish anti-Czech propaganda, accusing the Czechs of persecuting Germans; for example: 'Bloody regime – new Czech murders of Germans'. However, Czechoslovakia was a democratic country with a determined



President to lead it, Benes, a strong army and alliances with Britain, France and Russia. Hitler continued to threaten war. It seemed as if the whole continent would be dragged into war again.

#### 10. APPEASEMENT

At this point, the British Prime Minister stepped into the situation. Neville Chamberlain flew to meet Hitler at Berchtesgaden to see if peace could be achieved by discussion. Hitler was willing to talk: if he could get what he wanted without fighting, so much the better. He demanded the Sudetenland for Germany, on the grounds that it was a German-speaking area. Chamberlain agreed. His view was that Hitler did have certain reasonable demands and that war could be avoided by giving Hitler what he wanted. This attitude is called appeasement.

At a second meeting between the two, however, Hitler stepped up the bluff, pretending to be about to go to war. In desperation, Chamberlain and Mussolini called a third meeting, at Munich. Here, representatives of Germany, Britain, France and Italy agreed to hand the Sudetenland over to Germany. This was done, and Czechoslovakia was weakened as a result. Poland and Hungary also took the opportunity to seize parts of the country at the same time (see Map 12-2). Six months later, in March 1939, Hitler's army marched into the rest of Czechoslovakia: the promises he had made at Munich were obviously not worth anything at all.

Why did Chamberlain adopt this policy of appeasement? In the years since 1938, he has been

heavily criticised for it. However, it must be remembered that Chamberlain was regarded as a hero in Britain when he returned home. His hatred of war was shared by most of the British people.

*Chamberlain in 1938, before meeting Hitler:*

How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas-masks here, because of a quarrel in a far-off country between people of whom we know nothing.

*Chamberlain again:* I am myself a man of peace to the depths of my soul. Armed conflict between nations is a nightmare to me. But if I were convinced that any nation had made up its mind to dominate the world by fear of its force, I should feel that it must be resisted.

*Agreement signed at Munich, September 1938:*

We, the German Führer and the British Prime Minister . . . regard the agreement signed last night as symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again.

We are determined to continue our efforts to remove possible sources of difference and thus to contribute to assure the peace of Europe.

Adolf Hitler, Neville Chamberlain

Chamberlain and the British people were anxious to avoid war if at all possible. British government statistics had estimated that German bombing would kill 1.8 million British people in

government statistics had estimated that German bombing would kill 1.8 million British people in the first 60 days of war. It is also true that Britain simply did not have the weapons, planes, guns or tanks for a large-scale war in 1938. Chamberlain felt that if war could not be avoided, at least it could be postponed for as long as possible until Britain was prepared. On the other hand, some British people sympathised with Hitler at this stage: they felt that Germany had been badly treated at Versailles. They also felt that Russia was a much greater menace than Hitler and admired Hitler's anti-Communist stand. Only a few Labour MPs and a few Conservatives, led by Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden, opposed appeasement. The worst aspect of appeasement, however, was that Chamberlain was prepared to allow the destruction of Czechoslovakia in order to preserve peace. Britain put its world empire before 'a far-off country' and 'people of whom we know nothing' – the unfortunate Czechs.

In the end, both Chamberlain and Hitler completely misunderstood each other: Chamberlain thought that Hitler was a trustworthy, honest gentleman like himself. Thus, when Hitler said, at Munich: 'I have no further territorial demands to make in Europe', Chamberlain believed him, and said it meant 'peace in our time'. Chamberlain felt that Hitler had a few reasonable requests to make which, if granted, would be the end of the matter. For his part, Hitler misunderstood Chamberlain too: he thought the British were completely

spineless and would never go to war. He ignored the view expressed in Source 3B that in the end, Britain would act. When it became clear in March 1939 that appeasement had failed, Chamberlain joined France in alliance with Poland. Hitler, having outwitted Chamberlain at Munich, refused to believe that the British would go to war for the sake of Poland.

### *11. THE NAZI-SOVIET PACT, 1939*

Poland was obviously to be Hitler's next victim. The only country which could effectively stop Hitler from seizing Poland was Russia. Stalin had, in fact, been frantically trying to join Britain and France in an alliance against Hitler. These two countries however, refused to have anything to do with Communist Russia. In desperation, therefore, Stalin signed a Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler: both sides agreed not to attack the other. The Nazi-Soviet Pact, as it was called, also contained secret clauses agreeing to carve up Poland between them.

The rest of the world could hardly believe this turn of events. Here were two dictators who were sworn enemies (as the cartoon, Source 5, suggests), making an alliance. The Nazi-Soviet Pact made the Second World War inevitable, because of Britain and France's alliance with Poland. The Pact only lasted two years and then Hitler attacked the USSR. The war between them broke Hitler's rule and propelled the USSR to superpower status for 50 years afterwards.



## 12. THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

In September 1939, Hitler launched his attack on Poland. Within a few weeks, Poland was defeated and divided up between the two dictators, as agreed. By then, however, to Hitler's surprise, Britain and France had declared war on Germany.

### ■ SOURCE A

The general impression was that the majority of the [Conservative] Party are at heart anti-League and anti-Russian and that what they would really like would be a firm agreement with Hitler by which we could buy peace at the expense of the smaller states.

From Harold Nicolson's *Diary*, 16 July 1936

### ■ SOURCE B

From the day Hitler came to power, I have felt that the democratic countries would have to face war. I believe he was taken too cheap...I cannot see any way of stopping Hitler except by force.

Ernest Bevin, Labour MP, speaking  
in March 1937